IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: RHETORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF FAST-FASHION WORKERS

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Abstract

On April 23, 2013, the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh collapsed, killing over 1,000 people in what is considered the largest factory disaster in modern times. While brands and factories scrambled to do damage control, a new wave of human rights discourse emerged in an effort to encourage shoppers to consider the impact of their consumption on the lives of fast-fashion workers. With these discourses as context, this thesis examines six visual artifacts which make use of rhetorical presence to portray the fast-fashion worker. Emphasized in the work of Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, presence provides a means for the rhetor to highlight the most important or salient components of an argument. In order to create a more sophisticated rhetorical analysis, this thesis takes two realms together: the rhetorical, in which the persuasive techniques used within the images are examined, and the cultural, which details the experiences of fast-fashion workers, the emphasis on maximized profits and the influence these have on the content of visual rhetorical artifacts. The thesis first examines Fashion Revolution’s “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign, which is intended to increase brand transparency by portraying workers, then examines an H&M eco-conscious advertisement and an opposing anti-advertisement by Clean Clothes Campaign, and ends with an examination of two additional genres, protest art and the documentary photograph, in which the creator of the artifact speaks on behalf of the fast-fashion worker, effectively removing her agency. Through these examples, I argue that, whether for profit, social action, or simply reportage, the depictions of fast-fashion workers fulfill each institution’s rhetorical purpose, but in doing so, also create inaccurate, one-dimensional portrayals of workers as content, suffering, or entirely absent.
Lay Summary

The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse claimed over 1,000 lives and is considered to be the largest modern garment factory disaster. Following this accident, many new human rights discourses emerged, aimed at getting consumers to consider the impact of their purchasing decisions on the lives of the workers who create their clothes. Consequently, this thesis examines visual artifacts that portray fast-fashion workers, some of which are intended to shed light on the plight of fast-fashion workers, while some attempt to increase consumption and profits under the guise of corporate social responsibility and eco-friendly production methods. Thus, the key goal of this thesis is to demonstrate that images are never simply innocent snapshots of reality, and because they fulfill the rhetorical purposes of their creators, these portrayals of fast-fashion workers may be inaccurate or misleading, making it even more important that we critically receive these messages as objects of persuasion.
Preface

This master’s thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, M. Knezevic.
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Dedicated to all fast-fashion workers around the world.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

On April 23, 2013, garment workers in Bangladesh noticed concerning cracks in the walls of the garment factory in which they worked (The True Cost). Despite reporting these concerns to management, the workers were forced back inside the factory. Shortly after, the entire five-story commercial building containing the factory collapsed. The death toll: 1,135 (Knaus, Safety). The aerial photograph of the collapsed building appeared worldwide, and the event came to be popularly known as the Rana Plaza collapse. Widely considered the worst factory accident in modern times, the disaster once again brought sweatshop labour to the forefront of public consciousness. While brands and factories scrambled to do damage control by creating more efficient fire and safety accords and “we care” corporate social responsibility statements, activists and non-profit agencies remained unsatisfied with the slow progress. Consequently, a new wave of human rights discourse emerged in an effort to encourage shoppers to consider the impact of their consumption on the lives of fast-fashion workers. According to Merriam-Webster, fast fashion is defined as “an approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers” (Merriam-Webster). While images curated by fashion brands feature smiling, satisfied workers (if they are portrayed at all), the images curated by non-profits and journalists often feature workers in stifling factories and inhumane conditions. With this kind of discrepancy, which images are consumers to believe provide an accurate picture of fast-fashion workers, and are any of these images truly innocent snapshots of reality? One approach to these
questions is rhetorical study, which focuses on the process of persuasion; in other words, it examines how, and to what purpose, a rhetor motivates the beliefs and actions of the audience.

1.2 Theoretical Background and Overview of Argument

Rhetorical scholars have extensively examined the field of advertising, with work ranging from advertising in global contexts (Bulmer 2006), to reader response to various rhetorical figures (McQuarrie 1999) and ethical representations within advertisements (Campelo 2011). Within the context of fast-fashion workers and sweatshop labour, rhetorical work has included, for example, the experiences of factory workers themselves (Plankey-Videla 2012), the assertion of corporate, feel-good rhetoric on fast-fashion consumers (Grover-Roosa 2017), and the effects of gender on labour and power relations (Collins 2003). Despite the adaptation of rhetorical theories to the field of visual advertising in other areas, scholars have not yet examined the rhetoric within images that seek to advance human rights within the fashion industry, nor how fashion brands represent workers in a positive manner in order to impel consumers to increased consumption.

The central rhetorical concept that I will use to study the creation of meaning within the selected images is presence\(^1\). Originally intended for application to discursive argumentation, presence provides a means for the rhetor to highlight the most important or salient components of an argument. Emphasized in the work of Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, presence is described as an “essential factor in argumentation” (116). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca define presence as the action of making present that which is absent, or making more

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\(^1\) I have chosen to italicize presence to distinguish it as a rhetorical concept as opposed to its ordinary usage.
present an element of which the speaker has already made the audience aware (117). In the words of Atkinson et al., *presence* is “often understood as a technique that makes an element of argument concrete, real, and psychologically vivid for audiences” (357). Scholars have already taken Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s work further, extending *presence* to artifacts such as museum exhibits (Gross 2005) and pharmaceutical campaigns (Landau 2011).

Since it may be difficult for most first-world consumers to picture the daily struggles of fast-fashion workers in developing countries, human rights campaigns frequently use *presence* to make these situations vivid for consumers in the form of curated images, which either contain added text or consist of solely a photograph. In the case of human rights images disseminated by non-profits, the aim is to encourage audiences to consume more ethically by portraying overcrowded, stifling factories or collapsed factory buildings that are the reality of many fast-fashion workers today. In the case of fashion brands that attempt to portray their workers as content, the aim is to use *presence* to assure consumers that their consumption is ethical and to encourage continued consumption. However, while these portrayals might certainly impact consumers on an emotional level, does an image of a fast-fashion worker provide the consumer with sufficient, unbiased information on the daily struggles that workers face? And, likewise, can a photograph that is assumed to portray reality truly be completely transparent? This thesis seeks to cast a critical eye on the visual rhetoric of images that are concerned with portraying the treatment of fast-fashion workers and the difficulties they face, as well as the visual rhetoric of corporate PR that attempts to persuade consumers of fashion brands’ ethics. While *presence* is intended to portray a distant reality to its audience, this reality is never simply an innocent snapshot, but is always coloured with the rhetor’s intentions, opinions, and worldview. I argue
that, whether for profit, social action, or simply reportage, the depictions of fast-fashion workers fulfill each institution’s rhetorical purpose, but in doing so, also create inaccurate, one-dimensional portrayals of workers as content, suffering, or entirely absent.

1.3 Methodology and Purpose of Study

In this thesis, I assume a primarily visual-rhetorical theoretical framework, examining how presence is used by fast-fashion brands, non-profit activists, and journalists to advance their persuasive messages for and against consumption; I include newer theories targeted specifically towards analyzing visual media. Sonja Foss writes that “a rhetorical perspective on visual imagery is also characterized by specific attention to one or more of three aspects of visual images: their nature, function, and evaluation” (146). I borrow this methodology from Foss, examining the issues of an image’s nature (an artifact’s presented and suggested elements) and function (how the image operates for its viewers) within the body of each of the chapters of this thesis, and focusing on evaluation, particularly the potential consequences of each image, in the conclusion of each chapter.

As the core of my methodology I take two realms together: the rhetorical, in which the persuasive techniques used within the images are examined, and the cultural, which details the experiences of fast-fashion workers, the emphasis on maximized profits and the influence these images have on the content of visual rhetorical artifacts. Although these realms might be considered separate, they can be fused to create a more informed rhetorical analysis: according to J. Blake Scott, “a rhetorical-cultural study could consist of a more nuanced analysis of various rhetorical actors, power relationships and the interaction of historically specific cultural movements” (25). “The ultimate goal of refocusing rhetoric,” he states, is not “to better explain
how rhetoric works but to identify places and ways to intervene in problematic rhetorical-cultural practices” (33). Thus, while I aim to add to the growing field of visual rhetoric by outlining the ways in which presence functions within the context of visual human-rights images and feel-good corporate advertising, my primary goal is to identify problematic rhetorical-cultural practices and their effects on audience perceptions of fast-fashion workers, ultimately suggesting how we might remain attentive to the potential consequences of imagery that relies on presence as its primary rhetorical strategy.

1.4 Presence Defined

The ideas underlying presence can be dated back to Aristotle’s Rhetoric, in which he states that expressions which show a state of activity may set a thing “directly before the eyes of the audience” (211). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca take this concept further in the 1960s, stating that, “by the very fact of selecting certain elements and presenting them to the audience, their importance and pertinency to the discussion are implied” (116). For the non-profits, brands and journalist that are the creators of the images that I examine in this thesis, the importance, or pertinency, is focused primarily on the fast-fashion worker within the fashion supply chain. Consequently, for both groups (though to differing ends), presence is a useful rhetorical device for images that feature fast-fashion workers because it draws the attention to the human cost of clothing production. This realization appears to be what activists and non-profits might wish for consumers to take as a starting point, asking questions such as, “who made my clothes? What type of life does this person live? What are their working conditions like, and are they paid sufficient wages?”
In addition to emphasizing the fast-fashion worker in the supply chain, presence also functions as a visual aid for consumers who may be unfamiliar with the difficulties that fast-fashion workers often face. As Perelman argues, “the techniques of presentation which create presence are essential above all when it is a question of evoking realities that are distant in time and space” (35). For most consumers, the realities of fast-fashion workers are far away not only physically, but also mentally and emotionally; most consumers of the developed world might have difficulty imagining the physical, mental, and emotional strain on a worker who sews clothing at a factory 6 days a week, 12-14 hours a day, yet is still barely able to afford basic living costs. Of course, it is difficult to showcase all of these issues within one image, but visual rhetoric, through presence, might draw attention to one sort of struggle workers face. For example, an image of a collapsed worker who has fainted draws attention to the often-inhumane working conditions of garment factories, such as stifling heat and lack of lunch breaks. Regardless of the specific issue that activists and non-profits might choose to highlight, presence is a useful device to create a vivid portrayal of the situation of fast-fashion workers to audiences who may not be aware of these problems or their severity.

A final salient aspect of presence is achieving sufficient balance between presenting an object and driving the audience towards the desired interpretation. According to Perelman, “presence directly acts upon our sensibility” and “the presentation of an object—Caesar’s bloody tunic as brandished by Antony, the children of the victim of the accused—can effectively move the audience or the jury” (35). However, “effective presence can also lead to problems in that it not only can distract the audience but also lead them in a direction the speaker did not intend” (35). In the case of humanitarian imagery propagated on behalf of fast-fashion workers, the goal
may be to deepen consumers’ consciousness regarding the impact of fast-fashion production on workers’ lives, as well as to pressure brands into increasing worker wages and increasing safety in factories. But, as Perelman states, while presence can certainly be an effective rhetorical device in emphasizing certain elements, the explicit focus on any one of these elements may instead distract the audience or take the attention elsewhere. For example, a journalist might intend an image of a child labourer to draw attention to the fact that children should not be working long hours in unsafe fast-fashion factories, but the audience may then decide to boycott a brand rather than to participate in actions that can directly improve the situations of child workers. In this instance, focusing presence exclusively on the audience’s sensibility (in other words, emotions) might direct the attention towards an outraged boycott, which might result in job loss, ultimately detracting from the journalist’s original purpose. Thus, while presence cannot showcase every detail that is important to the curators of these images, and an image that attempts to do so would likely be cluttered or incomprehensible to audiences, the creators of humanitarian imagery must remain aware that their use of presence carries the potential to distract the audience from the desired interpretation.

1.5 Chapter Overview

In the first chapter, I cover the use of presence in social media using two images from the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign, created by the non-profit organization Fashion Revolution, whose goal with the images is to encourage consumers to engage in direct dialogue with brands in an effort to demand “a fair, safe and more transparent industry” (Fashion Revolution, YouTube). Every April, in commemoration of Rana Plaza, the campaign encourages consumers to take to Instagram and directly ask brands, “Who made my clothes?” Brands then respond by
uploading images of their garment workers holding “I made your clothes” placards. While it is unclear in what manner Fashion Revolution believes that the uploading of these images will directly create a more ethical fast-fashion industry, its choice to grant the most rhetorical power to fashion brands themselves might result in unintended consequences, as brands, of course, must maintain (and likely, increase) sales in order to ensure the longevity of their brand. While Fashion Revolution intends for the presence of the smiling fashion worker to signal brand transparency, the accomplishment of this goal may only serve to facilitate sales for the brands in question rather than directly better the lives of workers. In addition, the curated nature of the images, as well as the placement of the entirety of rhetorical power in the hands of brands, require examination with a critical eye, irrespective of the intentions behind the images in question. In this chapter, I answer questions such as these: What is the rhetorical function of the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign? Does the campaign actually improve the lives of fast-fashion workers, or does it only result in the unintended consequence of signaling consumers to continue, and even increase, their consumption, with no change to working conditions?

In the second chapter, I perform a comparative examination, analyzing the uses of presence in an H&M Conscious Exclusive Collection video advertisement and in an activist anti-advertisement by the non-profit organization Clean Clothes Campaign. Within this chapter, I examine how the Conscious Exclusive video advocates for the line’s “ethical” clothing, which heavily uses presence to showcase environmental harmony and sustainability. I contrast this use of presence in the advertisement with the subsequent absence of the fast-fashion worker, who is

2 Just as with presence, I have italicized absence to distinguish the rhetorical term from the ordinary usage of the word.
not included within the definition of “conscious.” I then contrast this the Conscious Exclusive video with the Clean Clothes Campaign image, which alters an existing H&M Conscious photo advertisement that depicts a glamorous model wearing one of the collection’s dresses and, using presence, juxtaposes it with an image of a distressed woman who is implied to have previously fainted due to malnutrition. Through a comparison of these two artifacts, I examine the roles that presence and absence play, the rhetorical devices used to complement them, and how attention to aesthetics might function to complement or hinder the goals of presence in each artifact.

In the third chapter I delve into two additional genres: protest art and documentary photography, to examine how Play Fair, a non-profit organization, and Aulakh, a journalist, are removed from workers’ contexts, and thus cannot fully portray the realities of these workers. As a result of speaking on behalf of these workers, rather than allowing the workers to speak for themselves, Play Fair and Aulakh unwittingly portray the workers as agentless victims who cannot speak to their own working conditions and their varied social, cultural, and economic contexts. The first image I examine is a photograph of a protest art installation, curated by non-profit Play Fair, that recreated a sweatshop factory floor on a rooftop in Athens. The purpose of this installation was to draw attention to the working conditions of female workers producing activewear for the 2004 Athens Olympics. By having protestors wear masks and physically sew t-shirts in front of the audience, this image of the installation captures the “facelessness” of female fast-fashion workers and uses presence to bring these workers to the forefront of audience consciousness. The second image I examine in this chapter is a documentary photograph taken

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by a journalist for the *Toronto Star*. While posing as a worker in a Bangladesh garment factory, the journalist snapped a photograph of the child worker who was her “boss,” using *presence* to juxtapose the 9-year-old girl’s childish appearance with her cluttered factory surroundings. In this chapter, I analyze to what ends the two artifacts use *presence* to advance the goals of their respective rhetors. I also examine how *presence*, although well-intentioned, might result in the representation of workers as passive and agentless. While these workers certainly possess at least some agency within their own contexts, by speaking entirely on behalf of the worker, the curators of these two visual representations privilege their own voices over the voices of the workers that they attempt to portray, ultimately silencing the worker and diminishing her agency to speak on her own behalf.

I conclude the thesis with a brief summary of the artifacts that I have examined, and then suggest possible directions that future scholarly research might undertake. These future directions need not only focus on the uses of *presence* in visual rhetoric that portrays fast-fashion workers, but more broadly, other exploited groups, and might also examine how corporate rhetoric uses *presence* to create misleading images under the guise of corporate social responsibility. Finally, I discuss how both new and existing scholarly research might be adapted for a wider audience of potential actors in the form of op-eds or news articles, concluding with the suggestion that a knowledge of rhetorical tactics can aid scholars and consumers alike in protecting against misunderstanding, and, most importantly, potentially misleading rhetoric.
Chapter 2: Who Made My Clothes? Presence-Driven Social Media Campaigns

2.1 Introduction

It is estimated that around forty million people across the world are fashion workers, and they are some of the lowest paid workers in the world (The True Cost). While the details of their daily lives may differ depending on the country and factory in which they work, the difficulties they face are strikingly similar. Across major garment-producing countries, whether it be Bangladesh, Cambodia or China, long working hours, unpaid overtime, poverty-stricken living conditions, and low pay are the norm in many garment factories. For example, one worker in Cambodia stated that she checked ten thousand pairs of jeans per day for flaws and could only afford to share a room with seven other young women (Timmerman 110), while a Chinese couple working in a flip-flop factory worked eighty to one hundred hours per week (Timmerman 171). Across all sectors, fast-fashion workers are paid poorly in relation to the cost of an item of clothing: according to an article written by Christopher Knaus for The Guardian, an analysis of clothing supply chains conducted for Oxfam Australia showed that “just 4% of what Australians spend on clothing goes to the wages of workers in garment factories across the globe. In Bangladesh, it’s as low as 2%” (Knaus 4%).

The Rana Plaza disaster not only brought these working conditions to the forefront of consumer consciousness on a worldwide scale, but sparked a rapid influx of non-profit and humanitarian imagery. It also inspired new safety accords, social movements, and alliances between producers and manufacturers to increase worker safety. Fashion Revolution is one of the social movements born of the Rana Plaza disaster, and it focuses on what fashion should be,
demanding radical change to create dignified work, inclusiveness, and environmental consciousness through various campaigns (Fashion Revolution Manifesto). One of the Fashion Revolution campaigns, the focus of this chapter, is called “Who Made My Clothes?” and is now in its fifth year. I have chosen this campaign because it is one of the most visible social media campaigns relating to activism on behalf of fashion workers, and because it has the capacity to engage a wide audience. Every year on the anniversary of Rana Plaza, Fashion Revolution encourages consumers to take to social media and directly ask brands, “Who made my clothes?” (Fashion Revolution). According to a YouTube video introducing the campaign, Fashion Revolution states that “too many live in poverty, exploitation or danger. We can change that. Join the #FashionRevolution and demand a fair, safe and more transparent industry” (Fashion Revolution, YouTube). The idea of the campaign is that consumers take to Twitter or Instagram to ask brands who made their clothes, and that brands will ideally respond, which has the effect of a) showing brands that this is an issue that consumers are actively concerned with, and b) increasing brand transparency. Brands are meant to “respond” by attaching a photograph of one or several of their (often smiling) workers holding a placard stating, “I made your clothes,” and perhaps a brief biography of the worker.

Before continuing on to a rhetorical analysis of two of these images, I pause here to clarify the rhetorical goals of Fashion Revolution and to identify any unintended consequences that the campaign might have. While Fashion Revolution, as a non-profit, is certainly concerned with bettering the lives and safety of workers, it should be noted that it is not quite clear how it hopes to achieve this goal; the fact that a consumer asks, “Who made my clothes?” does not necessarily mean that a brand will better its policies and improve working conditions. While the
campaign does provide consumers with an opportunity to directly interact with brands, the choice to grant the most rhetorical power to brands might produce results that run counter to the campaign’s goals: rather than promoting increased transparency, the campaign instead encourages the circulation of highly curated photographs of smiling workers (and does not showcase “horrific” working conditions that might then provide the basis for consumer boycott). Thus, while Fashion Revolution’s goal with these images—to increase brand transparency and aid workers—might begin as socially-conscious activism, it might end with increased consumption of the same brands, with no change to the lives of workers. While participating brands should certainly not be chastised for what seems to be genuine concern for their workers, due to the variety of rhetorical actors within the campaign, it is important to not only examine how these images function, but also determine what exactly their rhetorical goals are, and how these goals might counteract one another to nullify and even run counter to the goals of the campaign.

While social media campaigns are one method that non-profit organizations might use to encourage change, the rhetorical goals of the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign are somewhat ambiguous and appear to support slacktivism, in which consumers exert minimal effort in an attempt to create change. It should be noted that not all of Fashion Revolution encourages slacktivism, however. Under the “take action” tab on its website, Fashion Revolution lists several ways in which people may contribute to the cause: these contributions range from encouraging consumers to send emails to brands, writing postcards to local policymakers, printing and disseminating posters, and donating to the organization so that it can create more informative content and events (Fashion Revolution, Take Action). Because one of the central foci of
Fashion Revolution nevertheless appears to be the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign and its somewhat ambiguous goals, I have chosen here to focus exclusively on this campaign. Not only is the idea of “I made your clothes” somewhat misleading within the fast-fashion model (for example, in one Cambodian garment factory, eighty-five people had a hand in the creation of one pair of jeans) (Timmerman 129), but it is unclear how exactly the campaign is meant to improve working conditions. On its webpage for the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign, Fashion Revolution states that “the more people who ask #whomademyclothes, the more brands will listen. Use your voice and your power to change the fashion industry. Together we are stronger” (Fashion Revolution). According to this slim information, it appears that the goals of the campaign are to notify brands that consumers care about the well-being of workers and would like increased transparency in the fast-fashion supply chain, and that this should be done using one’s own voice in a united effort to put pressure on brands. However, while the campaign itself claims that its purpose is to improve working conditions through the push for transparency, an unintended consequence of the campaign might be to ease the conscience of consumers so that they can continue to shop from their favourite brands. While purchasing from brands they consider ethical is certainly not a detrimental action on the part of consumers, the empowerment created by a direct interaction with brands over social media might then instead result in slacktivism. When a consumer views an “I made your clothes” image, slacktivism continues as consumers are then reassured that the workers producing for their favourite brands are unharmed and enjoying their work, which is more likely to result in increased consumption rather than improvement in working conditions. In other words, if consumers already believe that a brand is ethical, then that brand will simply continue its operations, and working conditions will remain
the same. Therefore, this chapter argues that the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign, through its stated purpose, leads participating consumers to believe that they are helping to increase brand transparency and better the lives of workers, but may instead result in increased consumption rather than a direct benefit to workers. Due to these unintended consequences, consumers must remain aware that the images in the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign are intentionally constructed rhetorical artifacts that support the goals of the fashion brands that create them, and while these goals might certainly place ethical production at the forefront of company policy, brands are nevertheless required to maintain or increase sales in order to ensure the longevity of their respective companies.

The two images from the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign analyzed in this chapter were chosen predominantly for the content of their photographs and the accompanying captions. According to Fashion Revolution, in 2018, the #whomademyclothes hashtag was used on social media 720 million times (Fashion Revolution, 2018 Impact). While not all brands responded, 3838 brands responded to the #whomademyclothes hashtag, including global brands such as Zara and Marks and Spencer (Fashion Revolution, 2018 Impact). While most of these images feature smiling workers, many of them do not include any information about the worker, or actually show the worker in the garment factory. I have specifically chosen these two images firstly because they portray the worker within the factory (Mountain Equipment Co-Op, henceforth MEC), and the worker holding the product that she is making (Ashiana), which provide a slightly more realistic picture of the worker’s day-to-day activities. Both images are the creations of locally-owned (Vancouver and London, respectively) businesses, which allowed me to focus on the claims to transparency of smaller brands versus the extreme consumption
goals and consequent marketing tactics of large fast-fashion chains such as H&M, the topic of the next chapter. Additionally, I have chosen these two images due to their use of captions, which are presumably intended to further increase transparency and showcase a brand that cares for, and gets to know, each of its workers. A third criterion for selection was what appeared to be a marketing tactic in each of the captions: rather than simply including a photograph of a smiling worker (which many other brands have done), the accompanying caption is aimed at increasing consumer confidence in the brand’s ethics, which again, functions to support (an often necessary) increase in sales rather than a direct change in working conditions. Images that do not contain a caption were removed from the selection process because there is less of a rhetorical interplay; these images simply feature photographs of smiling workers in fairly mundane surroundings (such as having tea or standing in front of a door), primarily aimed at putting a face to the “I made your clothes” statement rather than reinforcing the transparency and trustworthiness of a particular brand.

The images that I have chosen are examples of how the campaign appears on two popular social media channels, Facebook and Instagram, respectively. The first image, published on Facebook, is by Canadian company MEC and the second, published on Instagram, is by British jewelry brand Ashiana London. Although Fashion Revolution designed the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign to promote increased brand transparency, in practice, the nature of the capitalist, free-market economy nevertheless requires brands to continue selling product, and in order to do so, brands might present themselves as ethical and their practices as acceptable (and even laudable) to the consumer. In order to critically consume the images from the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign, we must be aware of the possibility that fashion brands (beyond the two
images that I examine here) might capitalize on the illusion of transparency and increase profits through consumer confidence. Indeed, brands can both focus on ethical practices and on increased consumption; it is the latter goal that we must keep in mind when viewing these images. While brands present seemingly truthful snapshots of their smiling, happy workers, these images are not simply innocent snapshots of reality. According to Sonja Foss, visual rhetoric “involves human action of some kind, such as creating an ad, taking a photo, etc.” (144). While Fashion Revolution applauds all brands that respond to consumer inquiries, its only requirement for the campaign is that consumers tag brands with the hashtag, “#whomademyclothes,” and that brands post a photograph of a fast-fashion worker holding a placard and replying to consumers with the hashtag “#imadeyourclothes.” At first glance, brand responses to “Who Made My Clothes?” might initially appear to be satisfactory, featuring smiling workers, seemingly safe working conditions, and messages of worker empowerment. However, it must be noted that brands can choose exactly how much or how little to reveal within these images, as well as how they wish for the photograph to appear. While any amount of increased transparency should certainly be applauded, it is beneficial to examine the rhetoric that the “Who Made My Clothes?” images employ, for images may not be as transparent as they initially appear.

2.2 MEC Worker

The MEC image appeared as a Facebook post on April 24, 2017. The image consists of a photograph of a MEC factory worker and a text post, which begins with “My name is 黃海 and I made your clothes at Doni factory in China” (MEC, Facebook). The post then explains the origins behind Fashion Revolution, the principles behind MEC, and their dedication to workers, creativity and the environment. The photograph portion of the image utilizes presence by
showcasing a smiling worker holding an “I made your clothes” placard, with the factory in which he works showcased behind him. The textual component of the image enhances the uses of presence in the photograph by providing material to support the argument that MEC cares for the well-being of its workers and expands presence by providing more detail about the photograph’s most salient elements. Notably, the “speaker” of the text portion changes abruptly throughout the Facebook post: immediately after the worker featured in the photograph introduces himself and states that he made the clothes, the speaker switches to MEC and its values as a “co-op and apparel retailer,” which has the effect of removing the worker’s voice, as well as his agency to describe anything more than his name and location (and to smile). Since the photographic and textual components combine to create the argument and rhetorical function of the image, it is vital to examine them in concert, and identify how they might potentially create the illusion of transparency that is guided by social consciousness, but that does not directly result in a positive change in the lives of workers. This lack of a change in the lives of workers is particularly salient for the MEC image, as the Facebook post contains many “angry face emojis” and some negative comments from viewers whose comments about worker wages display visible frustration when MEC provides them with evasive answers.

Figure 1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a Facebook image depicting a Chinese factory worker at MEC holding a placard reading “I made your clothes,” accompanied by text that describes MEC’s company values. Original source: MEC.
How can an image of a Chinese fast-fashion worker argue, and what might this argument constitute? The MEC image argues by using presence to emphasize the worker himself as well as salient elements of his work environment (the photographic elements) and by expanding on and reinforcing them through the incorporation of additional details (the accompanying text). According to Perelman, “to create presence it is useful to insist at length upon certain elements; in prolonging the attention given them, their presence in the consciousness of the audience is increased. Only by dwelling upon a subject does one create the desired emotions” (37). In this image, the elements that the brand “insist[s] upon” are safety, cleanliness, and valuing the worker; these are all supported, and reinforced, by the image. The worker wears an apron and a metal glove to protect his middle and index fingers from the sewing machine needle, reinforcing MEC’s commitment to safety. Additionally, his work environment appears clean and free of hazards: his work table is neat and uncluttered, and there are no large tripping hazards on the floor. The worker himself seems to be well-taken care of by the company he works for: he does not appear malnourished or ill, and he is appropriately clothed. The factory itself seems to have adequate lighting from lamps and windows, and the hoody worn by the worker implies that the factory is not too cold nor too hot (sweating heat is a problem in many garment factories). The text, meanwhile, echoes concern for the worker: “As a co-op and apparel retailer, we believe that

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clothing can be made in a safe, clean and beautiful way, where creativity, quality, environment and people are valued” (MEC, Facebook). When viewed side by side, the textual and photographic components of the image both use presence in an attempt to convey transparency in their supply chain, and to educate consumers and offer them peace of mind. However, both photograph and text are not just brand responses to activism but are in themselves rhetorical objects.

The responses to “#whomadeclothes” can be considered visual rhetoric because they attempt to persuade consumers that, by showcasing photographs of smiling workers, participating brands are being completely transparent. Despite this lofty goal, these images, as visual rhetoric, are not simply innocent captures of reality. Susan Sontag writes:

The photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace… cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude. Moreover, fiddling with pictures long antedates the era of digital photography and Photoshop manipulations: it has always been possible for a photograph to misrepresent. (46)

As stated in MEC’s Facebook post, this photograph was taken by members of the brand’s social responsibility team during a factory audit. Yet, the placard that the worker is holding indicates that at least some part of the photograph was planned. Additionally, it would not be unreasonable to assume that perhaps the photographer, as a MEC social responsibility employee, would have ensured that the worker was wearing the appropriate safety gear (apron and finger guard) and might even have instructed him to smile. In this case, while the photograph may not tell us much about the technology used or the photographer as a person, it tells us about its intended use and
the image of the company that MEC wishes to portray: one that is highly concerned for the safety and well-being of its employees. This is not to say that MEC is not being transparent; rather, it is important for audiences of visual rhetoric to remain aware of the curated nature of images in order to receive and interpret them more critically.

Additionally, within the context of the image as a voluntary contribution by MEC to the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign, the use of the photograph of the smiling worker as a communicator of MEC’s company values is another indicator that intentional persuasion is at play. According to Sonja Foss, visual rhetoric may “involve transforming nonrhetorical visual images into visual rhetoric” (144). She cites the example of trees, which aren’t inherently visual rhetoric, but become so “when we put them into our homes to symbolize Christmas” (144). With the exception of the “I made your clothes” placard, the photograph of the smiling worker could just as well have been found in less rhetorically-charged situations, such as in a Wikipedia article or on a Google image search for “garment worker.” Without the context of Rana Plaza or the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign, the photograph might simply appear as a typical, albeit posed, portrayal of a fashion worker. However, within the context of the campaign and the details provided by the accompanying text, the image as a whole becomes an argument because it portrays MEC as a company that values the well-being of its workers highly and attempts to communicate these values to the audience. The inclusion of the text lends presence to the elements of the photograph and renders it rhetorical because the image is not simply a photograph of a worker but portrays a living example of the company’s commitment to corporate social responsibility. Thus, using the image, MEC intentionally attempts to persuade its consumer audience that it indeed values worker safety, happiness, and well-being, all while
maintaining control of what the consumer sees and does not see. The following image, a jewelry brand, also uses social media to lend to *presence* to the fast-fashion worker, but this time, with more description of the worker herself.

### 2.3 Ashiana Worker

The second image portrays a woman who hand-makes tassels for London-based jewelry brand Ashiana. Posted to Instagram as a response to “Who Made My Clothes?”, the image portrays a smiling, middle-aged woman holding the tassels she makes in one hand and a placard that states “I make your tassels” in the other hand. Just as the image of the MEC worker is intentionally rhetorical, the image of the Ashiana worker is not simply just a real-time “snapshot” of reality but contains its own set of deliberate messages. In “The Photographic Message,” Roland Barthes argues that “all imitative arts comprise two messages: a denoted message, which is the analogon itself, and the connoted message, which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it” (17). The denoted message is that of a giggling worker portrayed by the photograph; she does not appear to be in poverty as she is well-clothed, and she also appears to be content with her work. The accompanying text introduces the worker as Ganga, a mother of three who, “by working for Ashiana, is able to educate and take care of her family” (Ashiana, Instagram). The connoted message, on the other hand, suggests that Ashiana is a transparent brand that consumers can trust, a brand that cares for its workers, empowers women to be strong, working mothers, and creates a positive work environment; in other words, it is a brand that consumers would be able to support guilt-free. Notably, through a combination of photograph and text, the image dismantles and opposes the image of the horrid, overcrowded sweatshop that many consumers might have in mind at the
thought of the conditions in which producers of fashion pieces work. Whether or not the image is true to Ganga’s working conditions, the combination of connoted and denoted messages creates an impression of Ashiana as an ethical, socially responsible brand.

Figure 2: Ashiana London, "I make your tassels." Reproduced with permission of Ashiana London.

Another factor to consider in critically interpreting the “Who Made My Clothes?” images is the intended action that the brand wishes consumers to take upon viewing the image, which the image suggests through its use of multimodality. According to Foss, to understand the function of an image is to examine how that image operates for its viewers (146). From a rhetorical perspective, she states, the function of the image is “the action the image communicates” (147). The first action the Ashiana image communicates is that it is ethical for consumers to buy from and support the brand because it not only treats its workers fairly but also
empowers women in an employment sector that more often than not mistreats and underpays them. This message is achieved through the multimodal nature of the image; as with the MEC image, the Ashiana image combines a photograph of a worker with a text component. Here, the photograph communicates the worker’s apparent happiness at her job, while the text describes the worker’s life and the context of the image. Unlike the MEC image, which only introduces its worker by name, the text of the Ashiana image creates an additional layer of meaning by showcasing a brand that gets to know its individual workers, their lives, and their personalities. According to Leo Groarke, the different modes are “the significant ingredients from which arguments are constructed” and rhetors should consider which set of modes would be the best suited to a particular purpose (153). For the purpose of increasing supply chain transparency through the Fashion Revolution campaign, the combination of photograph and text works particularly well, as the photograph is used to lend presence to the worker, and the text is used to provide details of what is happening in the photograph, as well as to describe the brand’s mission, all of which reinforce the intended message of transparency, concern for employees and ethical considerations. Thus, photograph and text function synergistically within this “Who Made My Clothes?” image: the photograph portrays the contented worker, while the text communicates a brand that truly cares for, supports, and gets to know its workers. These details are aimed towards the consumer audience, which then might conclude that, by purchasing from this brand, they are both making an ethical choice and helping to empower workers.

2.4 Conclusion to Chapter 2

The rhetorical force of the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign as a whole predominantly stems from its use of presence across a system of like artifacts as opposed to a
single image in isolation. In other words, the campaign does not use a single image alone to argue for increased transparency in the fashion industry; instead, it relies on the creation of a memeplex, a collection of memes that work together as a collection of cultural units of information (Chielens), to emphasize the scale and importance of the issue. The notion of global presence, first posited by Gross and Dearin, is succinctly summarized by Atkinson et al.: presence does not only have to apply to single rhetorical techniques but can be extended to an entire text or system of artifacts that “targets the overall world rhetors construct for their audience” (358). As elements of individual brands’ social media pages, the “Who Made My Clothes?” images may not have sufficient rhetorical force to inspire large-scale participation on the part of consumers. If a consumer looked at only one of the images in isolation, that consumer might feel more at ease upon seeing a response image from their favourite brand but might not feel part of a larger movement or part of a larger positive change for fast-fashion workers in the wake of Rana Plaza. However, by constructing a “world” for its audience, one in which workers benefit and are treated fairly, the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign creates a network of images that involves the participation of social media users, consumers, brands, fast-fashion workers and social movements.

In the “world” constructed by this system of texts, brands and consumers have the space to interact in a mutual rhetorical exchange. The use of social media in the form of Facebook and Instagram for the “Who Made My Clothes?” images provides consumers, as well as brands, with the opportunity to publicly interact in a dialogue, with each party demonstrating to the other that they are concerned with the well-being of fast-fashion workers. Through global presence, the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign creates an entire system of artifacts that use presence in a
similar way to showcase fast-fashion workers from all across the world, and to submit the message that both brands and consumers can participate in creating a “Fashion Revolution” that is more sustainable, ethical and human-centric. Yet, audiences must remember the curated nature of participating brands’ images. While these images can certainly create a portrayal of brands that value the ethical treatment of their workers and are transparent about this treatment, these images are necessarily intended to portray brands in a positive light and drive sales in order to ensure brands’ longevity in a free-market economy. In other words, while the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign is a useful first step in increasing brand transparency and increasing consumer interaction with brands, audiences must remain critical when viewing brand responses, not only remembering that increased transparency does not necessarily lead to the betterment of fashion workers’ situations, but also guarding against potentially misleading rhetoric.

3.1 Introduction

Another arena in which consumers might come into contact with potentially misleading rhetoric is the field of fast-fashion advertising. Because fashion brands now find themselves in a climate in which consumers are actively asking more questions regarding how their clothing was made, many brands have chosen to respond with an increased emphasis on corporate social responsibility. Messages such as “We care for our employees” and “We want all of these employees to work in safe and healthy environments” permeate the corporate social responsibility statements of fast-fashion brands such as Forever 21 (Forever 21, CSR). In a similar vein, H&M boasts its own, separate sustainability website, providing detailed reports on working conditions, wages, chemical use, and supplier compliance (H&M, CSR). A brief examination of both fast-fashion brands’ statements appears to reveal an honest, transparent discourse that truly makes an effort to increase sustainability and human rights while ensuring responsible, environmentally-conscious sourcing. Yet, on the other hand, the mobile phone app “Good on You,” an app that provides ethics ratings of brands across the world, rates H&M as “a good start” but still a ways away from being an ethical brand, and rates Forever 21 as “not good enough,” and notes that it fails to “say anything meaningful” about its sustainability policies (Good on You Forever 21, H&M).

These seemingly conflicting narratives are made possible not only through brands’ use of presence, but also through the selective use of absence. According to Jamie Landau, “because the bestowing of presence is a process of selection, the suppression of presence, or absence, is a
corresponding technique of argumentation” (41). In other words, with each use of presence to highlight a salient aspect of an artifact, the process of selection necessarily entails absence, or the suppression of certain elements. Within corporate advertising, presence is often given to elements which will drive profits, such as the product itself or why consumers should buy it, and absence is used to suppress that which is not desirable, such as poor working conditions. On the other hand, activism can function to subvert absence (and corporate messages) by granting presence to these suppressed elements, such as bringing poor working conditions to the forefront of audience consciousness.

With the goal of examining this interplay between presence and absence, in this chapter I have chosen two images which mirror each other: An H&M advertisement in the form of a video, and an activist anti-advertisement which uses the classic H&M print ad design to protest H&M’s treatment of its workers. In order to analyze the ways in which corporate advertising seeks to suppress undesirable elements using absence, and how activist images use presence to highlight these suppressed elements in an effort to educate audiences, I have chosen these two images as they are both concerned with the same topic (H&M’s Conscious Exclusive line), but to opposing ends. While the Conscious Exclusive video seeks to create a narrative of feel-good rhetoric aimed at encouraging the consumption of their products, the anti-advertisement attempts to subvert the brand’s corporate messages and discourage consumption through shaming the brand for treatment of its workers. This chapter examines the differences between corporate narratives and non-profit activism directed towards consumers, identifying how both parties use presence and absence to achieve their respective messages, how activism uses presence to subvert corporate rhetoric’s deliberate use of absence, as well as the rhetorical devices that both
parties use to complement the messages put forth by presence and absence. Finally, this chapter examines some potential consequences of activists’ reliance on presence as the sole or dominant rhetorical strategy.

3.2 The Rhetoric of H&M Conscious

On March 25th, 2018, H&M published a one-minute long video advertisement on its YouTube Channel, titled “H&M Conscious Exclusive collection 2018 – campaign film.” The video introduces (and markets) H&M’s 2018 Conscious Exclusive Collection, and it is the seventh year that the brand has created such a collection. According to the video description, the Conscious Exclusive Collection combines “the latest in sustainable fabric innovation” and is a “thoroughly modern expression of beautiful craft and powerful femininity” (H&M, YouTube). According to a press release on the H&M website, the line features sustainable, environmentally-friendly materials, such as organic cotton, nylon fibre made from fishnets and recycled silver (H&M Conscious). While the line features a similar philosophy to H&M’s regular Conscious line that is readily available online, the seventh annual Exclusive collection, launched on April 19, 2018, is at the higher end than the average piece of H&M clothing. While environmental considerations in the production of clothing are certainly laudable for a well-known fast-fashion brand such as H&M, how, and to what end, does presence function in the campaign? What other rhetorical devices are used to complement presence, and how does absence figure problematically into corporate advertising considering the known difficulties that fast-fashion workers face?

The H&M Conscious Exclusive video advertisement follows the journey of three models, who each begin the video inside a house, gazing out the window in wonder as the sunlight beams
down upon them, and proceeds as they each walk through the landscape and eventually come
together at the top of a cliff. As the three women navigate scenes of pristine nature, posing
among flowers and beautiful beaches, clad in freely-billowing dresses, the women join up and
walk together along a majestic cliff, eventually linking hands and leaning on each other as they
gaze at the sea from the top. The colours and patterns of the clothes the models wear blend
seamlessly with their natural surroundings, emphasizing the sustainable materials that are used
within the collection. Throughout the video, the journey of the models is cut with shots of
unadulterated nature, such as gushing rivers, yellow wildflowers, and the ocean as the sun beams
through it. The music playing in the background for the duration of the video is a soft yet
uplifting piano melody, with an overlay of dialogue clips of each of the models reciting poetic
sentences such as “I search for music; rivers where constellations tumble with the stones” and “I
search for balance; trees that draw their strength from reaching out” (H&M, YouTube). As each
model speaks her line, the other two models’ voices recite the same lines in the background at a
slightly lower volume, slightly lagging behind the first model’s voice to produce the effect of an
echo, further emphasizing the women’s’ unity and connectedness. The video ends with all three
models holding hands at the top of the cliff as the camera pans away from them, while all three
say “choose consciously, choose beautifully” in unison as the H&M Conscious Exclusive logo
appears over the final shot of the sky. Important to note is that the comments feature is disabled
for the video, which suggests that H&M does not wish to initiate dialogue on its video, perhaps
to avoid a situation with consumers such as MEC’s, who might scrutinize the brand, ask about
worker wages, and overall decrease the persuasive effect of the video to those consumers who
are in the habit of reading social media comments.
Although the video weaves an aesthetically pleasing narrative of ethical consumerism through environmentally-conscious clothing, the choices of which elements to lend presence to are intentional, and the motives of a company with an advertisement that portrays this feel-good rhetoric must be central to the analysis of such an artifact. In her examination of Kodak photographs, Diane S. Hope argues as follows:

advertising’s explicit persuasive goal—to market and sell goods, services, or brands—determines that the central set of questions must involve the rhetorical critic in direct consideration of a commercial enterprise intended to create profit through the circulation of representations. Thus, the rhetoric of pictorial images in advertising cannot be separated realistically from their ideological roots. (94-95)

The images presented in the video lend presence to elements that most highlight the values promoted by the Conscious Exclusive collection: stylish clothing through harmony with nature, and connectedness with each other and with the Earth through minimal environmental impact. However, the goal of the advertisement is to sell more product, so these values are not simply a representation of the environmental consciousness that the materials within the collection have been sourced with, but an intentional persuasive theme throughout the advertisement. In other words, by choosing to purchase environmentally-conscious clothing, consumers are made to feel that they are benefiting the environment. For example, in their discussion of the citizen-consumer and the consumption of local foods, Colleen Derkatch and Philippa Spoel argue that environmental health citizens “are assumed to care deeply about the environment and to want to help protect it through the personal action of supporting local food production. Citizens are encouraged to take action through caring acts such as ‘preserving’ and ‘protecting’ the
environment by consuming local food” (162). Within the Conscious Exclusive video, citizen-consumers are placed in the role of caring, conscientious customers who can do their part for the environment by choosing to purchase from an environmentally-conscious clothing line. Part of H&M’s feel-good rhetoric, then, stems from the idea that viewers can feel good not only about purchases that benefit the environment (here, through re-routing waste materials away from the landfill), but also can feel good about themselves for being ethical, virtuous shoppers. While it is true that the H&M Conscious Exclusive collection does utilize materials that are more sustainable than ones traditionally used in fast fashion, the brand capitalizes on the idea of feel-good rhetoric primarily to achieve its ultimate goals: to increase its profit margins and drive sales.

Multimodality in visual representations of presence is particularly useful when analyzing video advertisements, and an analysis of these modes can reveal the persuasion at work within the interplay of the video’s visual and auditory components. Regarding multimodality, Leo Groarke argues that the different modes are “the significant ingredients from which arguments are constructed” (153). For Groarke, the modalities that are crucial to, and make up, argument are not only constructed of those modalities which we deem typical of multimodality (the visual and verbal modes) but also of modes such as sound, taste, music, smell and touch (134). The H&M campaign video primarily makes use of the visual and verbal modes, but also the mode of sound (the voices of the models, the soft piano music), and the tactile mode (the billowing, soft fabrics of the models’ clothes). The campaign video combines all of these elements to enact the qualities of the clothing H&M deems most important for consumers to remember: that it is fashionable, environmentally conscious and enables humans to be in harmony with nature rather
than in opposition to it. The various overlapping elements of the video, from the stunning visuals of nature to the soft piano and the models’ poetic monologues, all come together to enact the big picture of persuasion as curated by H&M: convince the customer that these clothes are environmentally friendly, and that they too will be in harmony with nature just as the models are. Using multimodality as one of its dominant strategies, the video attempts to subvert the traditional conception that the consumption of fast fashion destroys the environment, and that rather, through more environmentally-conscious and sustainable-fabric centered collections such as H&M’s, fast fashion has the potential to contribute beauty, harmony and sustainability to the world.

While presence highlights themes of harmony with the environment that embody the values of the Conscious Exclusive collection, it is essential to highlight that presence necessarily entails absence, which excludes the garment worker from H&M’s definition of “conscious.” For example, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca cite the deliberate suppression of presence as a noteworthy phenomenon (118). Similarly, Ott et al. discuss the consequences that absence has on the interpretations of a collection of artifacts; absence is “a material space that is felt and full of meaning” (217). In the firearms museum that the authors visited and analyzed, they found that the museum used presence to showcase guns as tools, commodities and objects of beauty, while it used absence to cause the erasure of the negative aspects of guns, such as violence, war and colonialism (233). Within the Conscious Exclusive video, presence is utilized to showcase the “conscious” elements of the clothing line, which, according to H&M, involve minimizing both brand and consumer’s environmental impact. However, it can be argued that a component of being a conscious consumer is a consideration of the human impacts of fast fashion. The video,
however, does not showcase, nor even acknowledge, the workers who produce these clothes; nor do the video description or the online press release. Consequently, the video’s focus on the presence of nature and environmental harmony necessarily entails the absence of some other element, which in this case is the exclusion of the garment worker in the definition of “conscious.” While it is not the intention of this thesis to argue that H&M must or should depict fashion workers in their marketing campaigns, the absence of the garment workers in these campaigns nevertheless guides the viewer away from the thought of fast-fashion workers’ role within this definition. This use of absence sheds light on the continued minimization of the plight of workers by fast-fashion brands and focuses on uncontestable, feel-good aspects of conscious clothing, such as the re-use and recycling of materials previously destined for the landfill, which creates a more positive image of the brand in question, ultimately aiming to increase consumers’ willingness to buy.

3.3 H&M Unconscious: An Activist Appropriation

Although the H&M Conscious line seems to be a commendable first step in decreasing the environmental footprint of fast fashion, some activists have not been persuaded by its feel-good rhetoric. Thus, the second image in this comparison is an H&M anti-advertisement in which an elegant woman models a dress in a garden. However, the advertisement has been altered for the purpose of protest through the inclusion of an image of a distressed fast-fashion worker, turning it into an anti-advertisement that functions to subvert the original advertisement’s intention (to increase consumption). This image was launched in 2013 as a stand-alone spoof by Amsterdam-based non-profit Clean Clothes Campaign, which describes itself as “a global alliance dedicated to improving working conditions and empowering workers
in the global garment and sportswear industries” (Clean Clothes, About Us). Specifically, the anti-advertisement in question was created in response to mass faintings occurring throughout Southeast Asian garment factories, which has resulted in the collapses of more than 2900 workers, several hundred of them at H&M suppliers, in Cambodia alone (Clean Clothes, Unconscious). The image mirrors the style of classic H&M print adverts, which feature the item of clothing on a model with the price of the item featured next to it. According to Clean Clothes Campaign, garment workers in Cambodia are malnourished due to an inability to afford adequate food on the low wages provided by factories. For example, while the Ministry of Social Affairs of Cambodia raised the minimum wage to seventy-five dollars USD per month in March 2013, the Asia Floor Wage Alliance states that a monthly living wage of 274 USD is necessary to cover basic needs, almost four times the new minimum wage (Clean Clothes, Unconscious). Clean Clothes Campaign’s placement of the text directly on an existing H&M advertisement creates a contrast between corporate, for-profit advertising and the human rights focus of the Clean Clothes Campaign.
Unlike the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign, which uses the presence of the fast-fashion worker to pacify, the Clean Clothes image uses the presence of the fashion worker to shock. By deviating from the expected schema of H&M advertisements and directly juxtaposing a glamorous model with an ill worker, the anti-advertisement attempts to unsettle the viewer with the realization that the H&M Conscious line might not be so conscious after all. Mark Callister and Lesa Stern argue that an ad schema can be described as the expectations consumers will have about the way that products are usually featured within the context of print advertising (Go Figure! 145). The classic schema of the H&M advertisement involves a photograph of a model
wearing an item of clothing (with or without a backdrop), and the price listed near the image to
demonstrate H&M’s affordability. The Clean Clothes image, however, deviates from this schema
as it portrays a young woman hooked up to an IV with the caption “H&M Unconscious
Collapses: Start paying living wages.” The image also includes the words “hungry and
malnourished” under the H&M logo and the logo of the Clean Clothes Campaign in the far-left
corner. Although the H&M model is not taken out of the picture, she is instead placed in the
background, with the distressed garment worker in the foreground of the image. Thus, by placing
this image directly next to the glamorous model and including the caption “hungry and
malnourished,” Clean Clothes Campaign disrupts the H&M advertising schema and creates a
shocking image that aims to discourage, rather than encourage, consumption.

In addition to establishing the presence of the fast-fashion worker, the rhetorical force of
the Clean Clothes image stems from its ability to refute the values claimed by the original H&M
Conscious Exclusive collection as the definition of “conscious” clothing. Randall Pickering and
Barbara Lake argue that images, “even though they are not propositional and hence lack the
capacity, strictly speaking, to negate, nonetheless may be said to ‘refute’ other images” (90). The
Conscious Exclusive video presents the core values that constitute conscious shopping as an
emphasis on sustainable materials and harmony with, rather than destruction of, the environment.
On the other hand, the “Unconscious” campaign capitalizes on the mass garment factory
faintings to refute H&M’s claim that its new line constitutes conscious clothing: according to
Christa Luginbühl, a spokeswoman for Clean Clothes Campaign, “H&M claims that their clothes
are made with responsibility for people and the environment, but hundreds of overworked and
malnourished workers faint during their daily work. A fashion collection cannot be ‘conscious’,

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‘sustainable’ or ‘responsible’ if a producer denies garment workers the basic human right for a living wage” (Clean Clothes, Unconscious). The Clean Clothes image visually illustrates Luginbühl’s argument by directly stating that H&M’s clothing line is in fact “unconscious” by suggesting that the collapses occur as a result of insufficient wages and malnourishment.

Although the Clean Clothes image does not refute the fact that the Conscious collection is more environmentally friendly than regular H&M clothing, it directly refutes the fact that the term “conscious” can apply to H&M clothing because it does not include the well-being of its workers in this definition. Thus, the Clean Clothes image refutes H&M’s definition of conscious clothing, arguing, as Luginbühl states, that the basic living wage for fast-fashion workers must be included for a fashion brand to claim that its clothing line is conscious, sustainable, and responsible.

### 3.4 To Buy or not to Buy? A Comparison

While presence will always bring an element “before the eyes” of the audience, its function can markedly differ according to the specific goals of the rhetor. Although both artifacts stylistically take the form of an H&M advertisement (one being an actual advertisement, and the other an anti-advertisement), due to their differing intentions, their uses of presence perform contrasting functions. These contrasting functions can be classified according to the artifacts’ respective rhetorical aims, which fall under Aristotle’s branches of rhetoric: the deliberative, the forensic and the epideictic. First, the Conscious Exclusive demonstrates two of these branches of rhetoric: the deliberative and the epideictic. According to Aristotle, epideictic rhetoric can be characterized as “praise or blame” regarding the existing conditions of the present (17). The purpose of the Conscious Exclusive video is to assure the viewer/consumer that the line is eco-conscious, as demonstrated by the presence of scenes of nature and models in harmony with the
Earth and with each other. Here, epideictic rhetoric assumes the form of self-praise through the assertion of positive values, in which H&M applauds itself for its commitment to the environment, as well as for being a brand that enables consumers to participate in environmentally-conscious consumerism. Additionally, the Conscious Exclusive video demonstrates deliberative rhetoric, which Aristotle defines as rhetoric which aims to “exhort or dissuade” regarding future actions (17). In this instance, the Conscious Exclusive video aims to exhort its viewers to purchase H&M clothing on the basis that it is both ethically-produced and beneficial to the environment by diverting waste materials from landfills. Here, the deliberative and the epideictic combine to create an advertisement that portrays H&M as an ethical, environmentally-conscious brand whose clothes consumers will want to purchase.

In contrast, the Clean Clothes image demonstrates all three branches of rhetoric: the deliberative, the epideictic, and the forensic. However, due to the differing intentions of the Clean Clothes image from those of the Conscious Exclusive video, the uses and aims of each branch of rhetoric differ. While the Clean Clothes image also makes use of deliberative rhetoric, it attempts to dissuade rather than to extort. Through its protest of H&M’s lack of ethics regarding worker wages, malnourishment, and worker collapses, the Clean Clothes image attempts to dissuade viewers regarding future action—in this case, from purchasing clothing that only appears to be conscious on the surface. Beyond dissuading consumers from making future H&M purchases, the Clean Clothes image demonstrates epideictic rhetoric by laying blame on H&M for worker fainting and malnutrition and criticizing the company’s use of the word “conscious” to describe its clothes. Through the text of the anti-advertisement and the image of the distressed woman, the image blames H&M for the state of its workers and claims that their
present suffering (i.e. malnourishment caused by low wages, as well as overwork) is due to H&M’s negligence. Like the Conscious Exclusive video, the Clean Clothes image takes up positive values, but in the form of putting people over profit and placing the utmost importance on the health of workers, which functions to discredit H&M’s claims of ethically-produced fashion. Finally, unlike the Conscious Exclusive video, the Clean Clothes image makes use of forensic rhetoric, which is concerned with accusation and defense (Aristotle 17). In this instance, the Clean Clothes image functions in an accusatory manner, in which it finds H&M guilty for its actions. Through the presence of the collapsed/ill workers and the use of adjectives such as “malnourished,” the Clean Clothes image accuses H&M for unethical treatment of its workers. These accusations then work together with the epideictic to discredit H&M’s claims to being ethical, and combined with the deliberative, ultimately attempt to dissuade viewers from purchasing H&M clothing. Thus, although both the Conscious Exclusive video and the Clean Clothes image use presence to achieve their ends, examining both artifacts’ use of the branches of rhetoric can help illuminate how the use of presence, even within images that begin from a similar form, can differ radically depending on the rhetor’s intention.

Another method that both artifacts use in an attempt to achieve their respective rhetorical goals is to evoke emotion. First, the Clean Clothes image aims to increase audience guilt by lending presence to the garment worker, who continues to be negatively impacted by abysmally low wages. Roger Bennett examines the relationship between guilt and advertising, defining guilt as “genuine remorse for an action,” which then causes the individual to want to apologize, act responsibly and make good on the situation (486). Within an advertisement, he states, “guilt can be induced via an advertisement’s visual components, its headline, print size or colours” (486).
The Clean Clothes image attempts to instill feelings of guilt towards H&M by including the image of a young woman, who, we can presume, is a factory worker due to the ID around her neck, in distress as she clutches desperately an IV pole, and contrasts her to the glamorous model in the original advertisement, who portrays none of the hardship that happens behind the scenes in the factories where these clothes are made. The addition of the captions “start paying living wages,” directed towards the company, and “hungry and malnourished,” directed towards consumers, also function to increase guilt by attempting to convince the company to improve its treatment of its workers, and simultaneously increase consumers’ guilt at contributing to such practices through their purchases. While the Clean Clothes image appears to be targeted towards H&M and its business practices, through public exposure, the image also has the potential to impact a lay audience, who, as consumers, may be exposed to the advertisement online and feel that, by purchasing H&M clothing, they are supporting H&M’s treatment of its workers.

In contrast, where the Clean Clothes image aims to increase guilt, the Conscious Exclusive video attempts to decrease guilt by promoting the idea that purchasing from the Conscious line is a positive, environmentally beneficial action. With the video, the idea is that the consumer will feel good upon purchasing environmentally-friendly clothes that promote the recycling of materials which would otherwise become landfill waste. For example, Campelo et al. state that “advertising acts persuasively to create new needs for consumers, and to create meanings in order to justify these needs” (3). The Conscious Exclusive video performs this function by creating the need for the consumer to purchase clothing made from sustainable and innovative materials in order to reduce environmental impact. Despite the fact that consumption of new clothing inevitably increases landfill waste once these garments are thrown away, H&M’s
video nevertheless suggests that the act of purchasing from the H&M Conscious Exclusive line is beneficial, rather than detrimental, to the environment. Thus, the *presence* of the environment in the campaign video, particularly the unadulterated scenes of nature, reduces potential guilt that the viewer may feel by dissociating consumption with environmental destruction. Instead, the viewer may associate consumption with a positive impact on the environment, and consequently attempt to replace potential feelings of guilt with feelings of contribution and/or environmental responsibility. By eliminating garment workers and replacing them with the environment, the Conscious Exclusive video creates a new need for consumption and emphasizes environmental preservation through consumption in order to justify this need.

Finally, the arrangement of objects within each artifact, and the relation of the elements given *presence* to the elements around them, functions only to the advantage of H&M and to the disadvantage of Clean Clothes campaign. Atkinson et al. argue that, “unlike the simple event of selection, which confers presence on elements by virtue of their actuality in an argument (relative to what is not selected), the *manner* of an element’s presentation gives it presence by virtue of its *amplitude relative to other elements* included” (360, emphasis mine). Due to its form as a video, the Conscious Exclusive YouTube advertisement has the capacity to convey its message within the minute of runtime that comprises the length of the video, and thus does not have to rush or clutter its visuals in order to do so. Due to the constraints of its chosen medium, the Clean Clothes image, on the other hand, must make its case within a single image rather than in a progression of shots. While the Clean Clothes image attempts to convey a multitude of information to the audience at once, its manner of presentation appears quite cluttered, as its most salient aspects are many: the image includes the original H&M Conscious advertisement,
the parodied H&M logo, the Clean Clothes logo, the “Unconscious Collapses, start paying living wages” text, the model juxtaposed with the distressed worker, and the barely visible unconscious worker in the background. Compared to the Conscious Exclusive video, with its seamless transitions and focus on presenting just one salient aspect at a time, the Clean Clothes image is cluttered. While, of course, Clean Clothes is more constrained in what it is able to show in a single image, the design of this image results in a visual clutter does not appear to have a logical order in which the viewer is meant to perceive and process its various elements. Indeed, the Clean Clothes image portrays the elements that are meant to be present in a somewhat strange manner: first, the image of the glamorous model is at the visual centre of the image, while the image of the distressed garment worker, though larger, has been edited to look blurry. Second, while the image of the collapsed garment worker behind the model is crisp, it is positioned in such a way that the worker’s white shirt appears to blend in with the garden wall and is hardly noticeable. Clean Clothes’ choice to counter H&M’s video advertisement with an image, rather than a video, constrains the amount of information that can be presented without creating cluttered or confusing imagery. Consequently, while the Conscious Exclusive video can focus on one element of presence at a time with crisp, clear visuals, the Clean Clothes image attempts to portray as many elements of its argument as possible, which detracts from the overall message of the advertisement and results in a somewhat haphazard, if not entirely puzzling, process of interpretation.

3.5 Conclusion to Chapter 3

While it is certainly counter-productive to criticize fast-fashion brands such as H&M for creating more environmentally-friendly clothing lines and re-purposing waste materials, it is
important that both scholars and consumers nevertheless remain attentive to the rhetoric of these brands. While *presence* allows a brand to showcase the aspects of its products that it deems most salient, as I have argued, the use of *presence* necessarily entails *absence*. While an advertisement might initially paint a rosy picture of a brand, it inevitably removes something else; it is this *something* that we as scholars and consumers must draw our attention to, for the removal of certain aspects of an image that may turn audience attention to unpleasant facts regarding a garment’s production is intentional, as these facts might not support the fast-fashion brand’s goal to drive sales and increase profits. Therefore, in a culture where audiences are receiving visually-focused rhetoric with increasing frequency, an attention to rhetorical techniques and the motives that underlie them is fundamental for consumer audiences and scholars alike in order to guard against potentially misleading rhetoric.

In order to repurpose potentially misleading uses of *presence* in advertising, non-profit activism attempts to subvert or refute those misleading claims made by fast-fashion brands. While this goal is certainly laudable, an inefficient use of *presence* and accompanying rhetorical strategies might create more pitfalls than triumphs in activists’ attempts to persuade both brands and consumer audiences. As with the Clean Clothes Campaign image, which, while it does showcase that activists can mobilize for-profit advertising for their own rhetorical goals, also demonstrates that *presence* as a rhetorical technique isn’t infallible; it must still be used in consideration (and harmony) with the other rhetorical devices within the image. Additionally, activism as represented in the Clean Clothes image must also take the audience as it finds it; in other words, it should not assume that the audience will be familiar with all, or any, of the details concerning the issue at hand. For example, advertisements may result in miscommunicated or
uncommunicated arguments, because the advertisements might not ensure that the audience “can supply the necessary components to the visual enthymeme in order to reach the desired conclusion,” which can be especially true for those audience members who are removed from various controversies (Riley 283). With images such as the Clean Clothes anti-advertisement, the viewer might not fully understand that low wages are directly related to mass factory faintings as a result of malnutrition, or that mass faintings have been an increasingly prevalent issue in garment factories in Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia. Granted, Clean Clothes Campaign does provide enough information on the advertisement that the consumer could eventually grasp its intended meaning, but this strategy is not necessarily effective in our current fast-paced media environment, in which images are frequently simply scrolled through or “swiped” in seconds rather than examined in detail. As a consequence, the positive intentions of activism that attempts to counter the presence and absence used in for-profit images may become bogged down in misinterpretations, its messages unfortunately lost in the wake of fast-fashion advertisements, which often present carefully curated, seamless, and visually appealing advertisements deliberately aimed at soothing the consumer’s conscience.
Chapter 4: Fashion Victims: Presence in Protest Art and Documentary Photographs

4.1 Introduction

Thus far, I have looked at presence in activism campaigns on social media, as well as in an advertisement and an anti-advertisement, all of which use highly curated and planned-out imagery in order to accomplish their rhetorical purposes. Where I examined rhetorical artifacts that aimed to pacify in Chapter 2 and examined artifacts that aimed to influence action in Chapter 3, the two photographs I examine in this chapter aim to educate, and to a degree, emotionally impact the audience by portraying the lives and working conditions of fast-fashion workers through two additional genres: protest art and documentary photography. According to Karest Lewela and Humphrey Sipalla, “protest art exists across all the genres of art. In visual and audio arts, from stand-up comedy to paintings and rap music, protest art is unified by its socially conscious message and bold challenges to injustice and malgovernance” (Pambazuka). The first artifact that I examine is a photograph of a protest that took place in 2004. Though not explicitly stated as such by its creators, this protest functions as protest art in the form of a staged sweatshop on a rooftop in Athens, which, using actors posing as workers, protested against the working conditions and invisibility of female sportswear workers. The second photograph that I examine makes use of the genre of the documentary photograph; according to the webpage for The Encyclopedia of Photographic Art, the documentary photograph “captures a moment of reality in order to convey a meaningful message about what is happening in the world” (Cork). “Documentary photos,” it continues, “are typically designed to draw public attention to real-life situations which (in the opinion of the photographer) require urgent remedial action” (Cork).
Thus, the second photograph I examine was taken by an undercover journalist posing as a worker in a Bangladesh garment factory, and, along with the accompanying written piece, aims to draw the viewer’s attention to the plight of child fast-fashion workers. I have chosen both of these images because the workers are portrayed in such a way that they are spoken for: whether those involved in the photographs participate off-camera (as the photographer or creator of a protest) or on-camera (as an actor), these participants speak on behalf of the workers, ultimately portraying the workers as agentless victims who cannot speak for themselves.

While the two images fall under different genres, they nevertheless both aim to document some kind of a reality for their audience, whether that is a manufactured reality that aims to mimic, such as with the protest art installation, or a real-time one, such as with the photograph of the child worker. The word “photograph” itself implies a sort of representation of reality; a documentation of that which is in front of the lens rather than intentionally curated or altered material. While these two photographs both aim to document the reality of fast-fashion workers, they nevertheless carry out the agenda of the rhetors that curate them, whether that be a protestor or a journalist. Cara Finnegan describes the nature of documentary in *Picturing Poverty*:

> Documentary is a paradoxical mode of inquiry, for it is as much about the creation of drama and emotion as it is about the “objective” recording of “facts” … documentary is not about an objective, verifiable, neutral fact, but about the interpretation and arrangement of what is “out there” in a way that best fits the documentarian’s purposes and sense of social responsibility. (XV)

This documentation strategy is used by both images, in which their creators use the photograph to chronicle fast-fashion workers at work, or in their work environments, in the hope that
audiences will understand the difficulties these workers face as ongoing, real-life situations that require immediate attention. However, returning to the notion that the use of presence may carry unintended consequences, using the photograph as an “objective” snapshot of reality may unintentionally result in portrayals of fast-fashion workers as passive victims who require outside assistance to remedy their situations. This is not to say that the workers are truly passive; these workers certainly possess at least some agency within their own contexts. Rather, a portrayal of passivity is created through a privileging of the voice of the person or organization that is speaking on behalf of the fast-fashion worker and the resultant silencing of the worker herself. To examine these consequences, I analyze to what ends these images use presence to advance the goals of their respective rhetors, and how they might use other rhetorical strategies to complement their uses of presence. Within each strategy, I outline how presence might result in the creation of a passive, agentless, Third-World worker who requires the assistance of an outside (often First-World) agent. Finally, I outline how the privileging of the protestor/journalist’s voice over the worker’s can result in a detrimental representation because the speaker is far removed from the social, cultural and economic contexts that the workers face in everyday life.

4.2 Presence and the Third-World Victim

Before proceeding to an analysis of the two images, it is important to first outline how victimization may occur in images whose intention is to educate audiences about working conditions and attempt to elicit emotion, often in the form of sympathy. In order for a photograph to highlight the fast-fashion worker primarily through presence, complex stories are often compressed into images of exploitation and poverty, portraying fast-fashion workers as victims
of an unjust system. Ethel Brooks draws audience attention towards the issues that might be raised when the complexity of garment workers’ situations is downplayed in order to highlight (in other words, lend presence to) their status as passive victims of capitalism and abusive factory owners. She argues as follows:

Campaigns’ emphasis on the victimhood of women and children who work in the garment industry raises questions about agency among garment workers and campaign organizers… Because the interpretation of testimonies and the activism on the world’s shop floors and in various localities are then performed under the auspices of (Northern) public relations imperatives, the courage and complexity of those testimonies are often sacrificed in exchange for sound-bite appeal. (xxix)

Within images that aim to speak on behalf of exploited groups, the accompanying text functions similarly to a sound bite, in which the curators of rhetorical artifacts use words such as “exploited faceless workers” (Play Fair) and “my 9-year-old boss” (Aulakh) in order to quickly capture audience attention. However, these images only represent one aspect, one moment in time, of a worker’s experience, and cannot accurately sum up the entirety of that experience within only one snapshot. Much like the sound bites that Brooks discusses, the complexity of worker testimonies, including the social, cultural and economic contexts of workers, are dismissed in exchange for the presence of the fast-fashion worker on the factory floor, a snapshot that remains only a small part of each worker’s story.

In their attempts to portray a real life situation to audiences, the curators of these types of photographs tend to use presence to compress individual stories, which may instead backfire and feed into existing stereotypes of suffering, Third-World workers who require outside assistance
to improve their situations. For example, Arthur and Joan Kleinman argue that “video cameras take us into the intimate details of pain and misfortune” (1). They argue that, within stories of trauma, “the person who undergoes torture first becomes a victim, an image of innocence and passivity, someone who cannot represent himself, who must be represented” (10). While the images presented here do not represent literal torture in the true sense of the word, a focus on eliciting sympathy from the audience may result in a portrayal of fast-fashion workers as passive and needing representation. By engaging the audience in viewing suffering from a distance (in this case, through photography), the curators of these images may unintentionally feed into stereotypes of the disenfranchised, helpless Third-World worker, who has no agency and must be rescued from human rights abuses by an outside force. In their attempts to succinctly convey fast-fashion workers’ situations and elicit sympathy from audiences, the curators of such photographs may create unintended consequences, and it is this stripping of agency, and resultant victimization, that must be remembered when examining the images’ use of presence.

### 4.3 Staged Presence through Protest Art: Play Fair at the Olympics

The first image I examine strips workers of their agency because they are in fact not portrayed at all in the photograph; rather, they are represented by women who pose as workers on a makeshift factory floor. The photograph captures a protest art installation launched under Play Fair, a campaign created out of a partnership among Oxfam, Clean Clothes Campaign, global unions, and researchers (Oxfam, Acknowledgements). This event (henceforth Play Fair) occurred on August 10, 2004 in the leadup to the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. During the installation, “Women worked behind sewing machines, wearing masks to draw attention to the fact that the working lives of women who make sportswear are usually hidden from public
attention in solidarity with sportswear workers worldwide” (Play Fair). The campaign was launched as a response to research that revealed global problems within fast-fashion factories, such as “inadequate wages, high levels of compulsory overtime, impossibly high work targets, denial of workers’ rights, sexual harassment and verbal abuse in the sportswear industry” (Oxfam 5). During the staged protest by Play Fair, twenty women gathered on a rooftop to create a “sew-in,” in which all the women operated sewing machines while wearing identical white masks, with the Acropolis serving as the backdrop. As Lewella and Sipalla state, protest art “may not necessarily spur revolutions, but as a change agent its immense value lies in speaking truth to power. It is also educational, cathartic and empowering in situations of injustice” (Pambazuka). While many protests utilize the typical tools of the trade, such as protest signs, public speeches and rallies, Play Fair’s novel use of presence draws attention to the female fast-fashion workers of the sportswear industry, whose faces, and consequently, struggles, are far too often hidden from public view.
Most evidently, the Play Fair Protest’s “sew-in” is intended to mimic the workplace of fast-fashion workers, using the rhetoric of place to lend presence to the garment factory itself. However, while the rhetoric of place does effectively bring the factory floor “before the eyes” of the audience, this place reconstruction, which uses women who are dressed up as fast-fashion workers, does not allow the real workers to speak for themselves, stripping them of their agency. According to Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook, “Place (re)constructions can function rhetorically to challenge dominant meanings and practices in a place” (258). They argue that
place-as-rhetoric assumes that place itself is rhetorical, and “refers to the material (physical and embodied) aspects of a place having meaning and consequence, be it through bodies, signage, buildings, fences, flags, and so on” (265). To create its protest art installation, Play Fair reconstructs the reality of the garment factory floor through furniture (the rows of tables and sewing machines), its arrangement of people (women working in identical rows) and its performance of work (all the women are sewing the same t-shirt). Through this reconstruction, it attempts to challenge the dominant meanings and practices within the garment factory; in other words, it challenges the difficult, repetitive nature of the work itself, as well as the sportswear industry’s erasure of its female workers. However, in the installation’s attempt to challenge these practices, the workers remain “faceless” because the real workers have not been given space to speak. Instead of including or compiling testimonies from real workers (which non-profits such as Oxfam have done), silent protestors are used in their stead, and the non-profit speaks for the workers rather than providing them a platform for their own voices. Thus, while place reconstructions are certainly an efficient means of portraying distant realities to audiences, an unintended consequence of using protestors in place of workers results in a loss of agency for fast-fashion workers to tell their own stories to audiences.

Another aspect of the protest that strips the fast-fashion worker of agency is Play Fair’s portrayal of “faceless” workers, which supports this very point rather than negates it. According to Play Fair, the function of the identical white masks is to draw attention to “exploited faceless workers” and to the fact that “the working lives of women who make sportswear are usually hidden from public attention” (Play Fair). As Perelman states, one method to increase presence is through repetition, which he calls the rhetorical technique of amplification (37). The Play Fair
protest amplifies this idea of “facelessness” by repeating it multiple times within the setup of the protest: in the expressionless white masks that the women wear, their identical clothing, and their similar postures as they piece together the same white t-shirts at their identical sewing machines. These elements combine to form a key message that the Play Fair protest puts forward: how fashion brands might see these workers as faceless in terms of being identical and disposable, perhaps less as people and more as machines whose only function is to produce clothing. Yet, in the very act of attempting to protest the workers’ “facelessness,” the protest instead reinforces, rather than negates this notion because the workers been lumped together into one conglomerate of faceless workers. By portraying fast-fashion workers as “faceless” and silent, the protest once again creates unintended consequences in that it does not provide a platform for the voices of the real workers, and instead uses presence to group workers’ varied experiences and contexts into a singular, easily-digestible whole for the audience.

Finally, the physical movements of the women in the Play Fair protest function as embodied argumentation, calling for change through a re-enactment of the repetitive, difficult work that is the reality for many fast-fashion workers, but do so problematically through the total absence of the fast-fashion worker. According to Jason del Gandio, the basic idea of body rhetoric is “that our bodies communicate rhetorical messages… Our physical enactments materialize our political views and beliefs” (145). Embodied argumentation, he states, “describes how our bodily actions actually make arguments” (145). While the Play Fair photograph provides only a snapshot of the entire protest, it captures the protestors in action as they mimic the working conditions of fast-fashion workers through the repetitive sewing that they undertake. In the Play Fair protest, then, presence allows for the viewer to see body rhetoric in motion: the
bodies of the protesters themselves both demonstrate the working conditions of fast-fashion workers, and through a publicly-staged re-enactment of this work, argues against continued worker exploitation. However, as I discussed with the H&M video, we once again return to the notion that the use of presence necessarily entails the use of absence. Within the Play Fair protest, the use of body rhetoric grants presence to the repetitive motions that garment factory work entails. However, by choosing to use actors in place of workers, this tactic instead results in the subsequent absence of the actual fast-fashion worker. Through absence, the fast-fashion worker is effectively silenced, and is solely represented by the actors and the organizations that helped to curate the protest art installation. The absence of the fast-fashion worker, then, is nevertheless a byproduct of using the bodies of others to accomplish protest, and results in a portrayal of the fast-fashion worker as a victim who is unable to represent herself and must be represented by others.

4.4 Documentary Photography: Presence and the Child Labourer

While this next image explicitly grants presence to the fast-fashion worker rather than a woman temporarily posing as one, it nevertheless paints a picture of victimization by speaking for the worker rather than allowing the worker to speak for herself. This discourse of victimization, and to an extent, judgement, is why I have chosen to analyze this final image and its written piece. The image is an accompaniment to an article in The Toronto Star written by journalist Raveena Aulakh, who posed as a worker in order to get hired at a garment factory in Bangladesh. She describes Meem, a 9-year-old girl who works at the factory and is put in charge of training Aulakh at her new job, which entails trimming threads from sewn garments. The young Meem sits “cross-legged on the concrete floor” in the “wretched heat,” “a tiny, frail figure
among piles of collars, cuffs and other parts of unstitched shirts” (Aulakh). As the article progresses, Aulakh becomes increasingly upset that Meem must work such long hours in conditions that are unsuitable for children, concluding her article with “as Meem would say: Sab bhalo, it is all okay. It isn’t” (Aulakh). While there is a clear intent with both the image and text to educate audiences about the difficult work that child labourers perform, there remains an undertone of judgement in Aulakh’s evaluation of the situation, which colours the way in which Meem, her subject, is portrayed. Keeping in mind that photographs are affected by the rhetor’s worldview, to what ends does Aulakh’s photograph of Meem make use of presence, and how might her portrayal of child workers as victims actually be rendered problematic?


To begin with, the primary function of presence in this photograph is to highlight the unsettling contrast between the innocence of a young child and her work environment, doing so by twisting the conceptual frame of what it means to be a child. In the photograph, Meem smiles wryly at the camera, wearing a floral shirt with puffed sleeves, earrings and a bracelet, her hair
pulled neatly into two pigtails: a relatively ordinary depiction of a 9-year-old girl. While Meem herself does not appear out of the ordinary, the area in which she sits is not a typical environment for a 9-year-old: behind Meem are piles of clothes and fabric, some on the floor, some falling out of boxes, while sewing machines and unidentifiable equipment litter the cluttered tables. This contrast twists the frame of what it means to be a child from the point of view of the target audience of Toronto residents, and more broadly, Canadians or North Americans. According to Karen Sullivan, frames are “structures based on real-world experiences” (400). A frame, she states, can be thought of as a “script-like conceptual structure that describes a particular type of situation, object or event and the participants involved in it” (400). From a North American, or First-World perspective, the frame of child typically entails relatively carefree activities such as playing with other children and participating in recreational activities, with the only real work being attending school and perhaps helping out with chores. Visually, the frame of child might include children’s clothes (for example, pink ribbons or t-shirts with cartoon characters on them) and playing with toys such as Barbies or trucks. With this frame in mind, the shock value that the image provides is the juxtaposition between Meem (who fits visually with the frame of child) and her work environment (which contradicts the frame of child). Thus, using presence as its primary strategy, the photograph creates a disturbing contrast for the audience in the form of a child who is physically present in the domain of adult work; in other words, the image both represents what Meem currently is, and, somewhat judgementally, what she could or should be in the absence of the conditions that drove her to work in the factory.

While Aulakh’s image and article aim to elicit audience sympathy for the harsh realities faced by children like Meem, perhaps unconsciously, Aulakh creates a tone of judgement
throughout her article, affecting our perception of its accompanying photograph and reinforcing the notion that an image is never just a “snapshot” of reality, but rather a rhetorically-charged artifact. Arthur and Joan Kleinman quote Michael Shapiro, who argues that “because the real is never wholly present to us, how it is real for us is always mediated through some representational practice. We lose something when we think of representation as mimetic” (9).

Similarly, Aulakh’s photograph and the accompanying article are not simply mimicking Meem’s working conditions for the audience but are coloured with Aulakh’s own interpretation and feelings regarding the situation. From Aulakh’s commentary in the article, it is evident that she not only feels sorry for Meem, but that she is judgmental, and even disapproving of the situation. For example, Aulakh states that she does not want to see Meem ever again because “Meem did not look unhappy. She was okay with working 12 hours every day, she didn’t see anything wrong with sitting on the floor, she quietly accepted the backache” (Aulakh). Although Aulakh acknowledges that Meem’s parents were forced to send her to work due to poverty, she nevertheless follows up this admission by comparing Meem with her affluent best friend’s daughter, who is the same age as Meem but attends school in South Delhi and wishes to become a NASA scientist (Aulakh). Immediately after her description of this girl, Aulakh compares her to Meem, “the little girl who did not attend school anymore, never had any time to play and dreamed of being a sewing operator one day” (Aulakh). From Aulakh’s commentary, it is evident that Meem’s situation has been mediated through the lens of Aulakh’s own worldview, in which it is not only unacceptable for children to work but is a result of the shortcomings of her parents or a society that has failed her, rather than a situation affected by many factors, such as systemic poverty and poor wages. Although Aulakh’s piece is well-intentioned and Meem’s
situation clearly upsets her, Aulakh’s portrayal of Meem nevertheless remains problematic, retaining a tone of judgement that views the situation through her own lens rather than one that is informed by Meem’s own socio-economic context—a lens which is then passed down to the audience as it interprets the image.

Additionally, Aulakh’s depiction diminishes Meem’s agency because she is not given a chance to speak for herself. Because Meem is essentially a stranger to the audience, yet is portrayed as someone necessitating sympathy, Aulakh takes it upon herself to function as Meem’s representative, speaking for her through both the photograph and the article. In “The Suffering Stranger: Medical Anthropology and International Morality,” Leslie Butt argues that the suffering stranger is a rhetorical device that represents “people whose stories are produced for consumption in international circles” (2). This device, she states, “is primarily the result of an imperative to try to speak for others on a global front. The use of truncated tales of suffering strangers prioritizes international moralities over local experiences” (3). To the Western eye, a potentially dangerous workshop is no place for a child, and Meem’s smile and little-girlish appearance are made all the more striking and upsetting when viewers know that what should be in the background is a school or a playground, not piles of fabric and sewing machines. This “international morality” is then prioritized over Meem’s own, local experience, which, as Aulakh points out, is a result of her family’s poverty. The imperative to speak for others in order to represent them internationally may be well-intentioned, but, as Aulakh’s article (with its almost complete lack of direct quotation from Meem) demonstrates, does not really allow the suffering stranger to speak for herself. Because Aulakh’s image and article are intended for the consumption of an audience that may be unfamiliar with the situation at hand, the lens of the
“suffering stranger” accomplishes Aulakh’s goal of eliciting sympathy, but by simultaneously silencing the child worker, also problematically diminishes Meem’s agency.

Finally, Aulakh’s portrayal of Meem as representative of others like her is problematic because the act of categorizing these children into one global collective reinforces stereotypes of the exploited, Third-World child worker. Aulakh lumps Meem into this collective by suggesting that Meem is emblematic of child workers in fast fashion, and that she functions as somewhat of a cog in the wheel of a system of child labour that “works for everyone” in Bangladesh (Aulakh).

In “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses the colonial discourses surrounding feminist writings, arguing that, “by women as a category of analysis, I am referring to the critical assumption that all of us of the same gender, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the process of analysis” (337). Like the portrayal of women that Mohanty critiques, the portrayal of children like Meem in Western discourses of child labourers also tends to lump these children into one homogenous group, in which activists, without attempting to initiate dialogue on the matter, openly condemn child labour regardless of circumstances or geographical location. This portrayal of Meem is demonstrative of Orientalism, defined by Edward Said as a worldview that creates an epistemological and ontological separation of the East and West, denoting a Western, colonialist superiority which dominates and dictates authority over the Orient (the East) (1-3). While Aulakh does acknowledge that Meem’s family “had no choice” but to send her to work, she nevertheless maintains a somewhat judgmental, authoritative and Westernized worldview, an example of which is when she explains that Meem and her teenage co-worker “don’t think it is wrong that they are not in school”
Lumping the varied circumstances of child workers together with what it means to be a child in Western, First-World countries does not increase the audience’s awareness of the struggles that these children face, and instead denotes an attitude of Western moral superiority. Indeed, this viewpoint ignores the fact that children like Meem must sometimes find work in order to support their impoverished families (Brooks 14), or that garment factory work is often preferable to the alternative work options (Brooks 22). Instead of opening up dialogue with audiences that may not be aware of the difficult choices that systemic poverty brings with it, the notion of the exploited, Third-World child only serves to feed stereotypes of “bad” parents, “bad” factory owners, and “bad” governments, and does not actually bring the audience towards increased clarity. As Kelsey Timmerman argues, “The media gives corporations a reason not to advance the ‘Why’ conversation… it’s easy to inspire pity and to cry sweatshop. What’s not easy is coming to terms with the context in which the factories and workers exist and initiating dialogue based on this. Not doing so is naive” (235). While journalists such as Aulakh should not be denounced for their attempt at raising awareness of these issues, they must nevertheless be careful that their arguments do not oversimplify a complicated conversation. In other words, those who portray fast-fashion workers must take into account that the answer to improving the lives of child labourers does not lie on a condemnation of stereotyped workers and the systems in which they operate, but on informed, inclusive dialogue and real-world solutions that are context and culture-specific.

4.5 Conclusion to Chapter 4

Both of the artifacts examined in this chapter demonstrate a clear intention to draw attention to the plight of fast-fashion workers, which is a vital first step to reforming working
conditions, wages, and human rights. The use of presence and other rhetorical strategies in both artifacts is largely successful in highlighting the most salient aspects of each: The Play Fair installation focuses presence on the “facelessness” of workers, while Aulakh’s photograph and article, aimed at tugging on the emotions of the audience, focuses presence on the distressing image of a child in dismal factory conditions. The Play Fair installation successfully accomplishes the main genre convention of protest art, in that, through re-enactment, it challenges the injustices faced by female sportswear workers worldwide, ultimately encouraging its audience to view the producers of sportswear brands in a more socially conscious way. Aulakh’s photograph of Meem likewise satisfies its own genre conventions, this time regarding the documentary photograph: it aims to capture a moment in reality (a child at work) in order to convey a meaningful message about current realities (that fast-fashion workers are being exploited) and draw public attention to issues which the photographers believe require urgent remedial action (Cork).

At the same time, these representations are also problematic because they solely represent the point of view of the creator of the artifact, who is an outsider, without the inclusion of the very real experiences of the workers in question. Within the Play Fair installation, the women posing as garment workers have not truly experienced the plight of the women that they represent in their full contexts, while Aulakh, despite working with Meem for three days, is similarly removed from Meem’s situation in all of its reality. Wendy Hesford references Butler (1990), who argues that it is important to consider how identity is “performatively constituted,” including “how individuals solidify generalized categories of identity or take up multiple, often contradictory, subject positions in human rights representations” (45). While it is unknown
whether the women in the Play Fair installation are truly concerned for the well-being of fast-fashion workers or whether they have simply been selected by Play Fair as actors, through their participation in the installation, these women also “become” fast-fashion workers. While this “becoming” importantly gives presence to the type of work that fast-fashion workers might have to perform for hours on end, the sole focus on the body of the protestor-as-worker effectively removes the actual sufferer from the equation. Likewise, in the Toronto Star image, Aulakh takes up multiple roles: she is a seemingly earnest new hire in the eyes of the factory owner, but she is also a journalist who is aiming to expose the working conditions of children like Meem. Yet, with both artifacts, to what degree can these protestors-as-workers truly replicate the situations and contexts of fast-fashion workers if these protestors only take on the role of worker for several hours or days? Play Fair and Aulakh should certainly not be chastised for attempting to raise awareness of the injustices that these workers face, but their rhetoric is nevertheless coloured with their own worldview and experiences. While the Play Fair actors sew for the duration of the installation, they will soon return to their regular lives, while the real workers cannot. While Aulakh appears to be in Meem’s shoes as a fellow thread trimmer, she is not: unlike Meem, Aulakh will soon return to her privileged life while Meem will remain in the factory. Thus, while a multiplicity of identities and roles does aid the creators of rhetorical artifacts to represent others, these representations are not only problematic because they effectively silence the fast-fashion worker, but also because the protestors themselves are removed from the social, cultural and economic contexts that the workers face in everyday life.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Buckling Down: Directions for Further Research

In this thesis I have examined a number of visual artifacts, ranging from activism campaigns on social media (“Who Made My Clothes?”) to the advertisement and anti-advertisement (H&M Conscious and H&M “Unconscious”) to protest art and documentary photography (Play Fair, Aulakh), all of which use presence as their main rhetorical strategy. I began with a theory of presence as outlined by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca and situated this rhetorical technique within visual portrayals of fast-fashion workers. In Chapter 2, I examined how the structure of the “Who Made My Clothes?” campaign facilitates brands’ use of presence to soothe the consumer’s conscience regarding brands’ treatment of their workers, ultimately functioning to increase consumer confidence in fashion brands rather than create a direct improvement in the lives of workers. In Chapter 3, I examined H&M’s use of presence to highlight the feel-good aspects of their environmentally-friendly clothing line, while using absence to suppress negative aspects such as the company’s treatment of its factory workers. I then compared these strategies to Clean Clothes Campaign’s use of presence in an H&M anti-advertisement that counteracts the absence in the corporate advertisement by bringing the treatment of workers to the forefront of audience consciousness. Finally, in Chapter 4, I examined how documentary photographs and protest art, which use presence in an attempt to portray the most salient aspects of worker struggle to an audience that may be unfamiliar with it, also problematically portray these workers as agentless victims who require outside assistance to alleviate their situations. Moving beyond an analysis of these artifacts, to conclude this thesis, I
now turn to outlining possible directions for further scholarly research and how new (and existing) research might be adapted to a wider audience of actors.

Future research might take an ameliorative approach to analyses of images that depict fast-fashion workers, identifying problematic practices and the potential consequences of such imagery. The ameliorative function of scholarship is not a new phenomenon; J. Blake details that cultural critics are “not content to assume the role of the detached analyst,” but rather have the goal to “critique and work to intervene in problematic practices, oppressive power relations, and harmful effects” (21). This is not to say that the images that I have studied here make inefficient use of rhetoric; indeed, when used within visual media, presence carries powerful rhetorical potential due to its ability to convey the often-distant realities of fast fashion workers to the audience. Rather, the practice of using presence to convey these distant realities can carry consequences for the undiscerning eye, resulting in potentially detrimental effects. Simply due to a lack of literature on the topic, future scholarly research may wish to focus, first and foremost, on the uses of presence and absence in visual rhetoric that attempts to portray exploited groups such as fast-fashion workers, and, more broadly, workers in other industries who also face similar challenges. It may also wish to focus on the interplay between presence and absence, specifically, how corporate rhetoric might use these two techniques in order to convey a misleading image of benevolence under the guise of ethical branding. Finally, future scholarly research may wish to examine how the use of presence in non-profit imagery might avoid portraying the exploited as victims while still aiming for an emotional response in the audience.

In order to increase its audience base to those who have the capability to act on a broader scale, this scholarly research could then be adapted to public sphere documents to create a wider
readership and encourage audience participation. According to Lloyd Bitzer, the rhetorical audience must be capable of being influenced by discourse and mediating the change produced by the discourse (7). Here, the general public functions as an audience, for it is this group that is the source of current or potential consumers who can mediate change through their purchasing decisions, and also in their choice whether or not to participate in activism on behalf of workers. In order to reach these audiences, works such as this thesis, or other scholarly research such as books, articles, or studies, might then be converted into documents such as op-eds or news articles. By circulating these documents to a wide audience of potential actors, scholarship can move beyond solely a rhetorical analysis of presence-laden portrayals of workers towards educating audiences in these rhetorical techniques, perhaps ultimately encouraging them to enact change.

Since the Rana Plaza collapse, there is no doubt that the fashion industry has made and continues to make strides towards producing more ethical fashion and towards increasing the well-being of fast-fashion workers around the world. While presence is certainly not the only rhetorical device being deployed within the images that I have analyzed here, presence nevertheless remains an immensely powerful tool in bringing important issues to the forefront of public consciousness, especially when audiences are unfamiliar with or far removed from a situation. While activism on behalf of fast-fashion workers is certainly off to a good start in increasing the visibility of these workers and demonstrating some of the hardships they face to consumers, more study is required to identify the potential pitfalls of using presence in activism, such as the victimization of the worker or the creation of visually cluttered imagery. Likewise, more study is also needed to examine brands’ use of presence and absence to create a narrative
of feel-good rhetoric that functions under the guise of corporate social responsibility. No matter how well-intentioned the use of presence is, as both scholars and consumers, we must nevertheless remember that images depicting fast-fashion workers are not simply snapshots of reality, but rhetorically-charged artifacts that cannot be separated from the rhetors that create them. By maintaining a critical eye when viewing presence-laden images that attempt to portray the reality of a particular group, we not only decrease the likelihood of misunderstanding this reality or viewing it as one-dimensional, but, most importantly, allow ourselves to guard against potentially misleading rhetoric.
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